Problems not solved by US presence

There has been so little news in the mainstream media you could be forgiven for thinking that, with the return of President Aristide, all Haiti’s problems are over. Unfortunately this is not so. The US-dominated multinational force is failing to achieve its UN-mandated task of establishing “a secure and stable environment”.

Human rights violations carried out by the Haitian military and paramilitary gangs continue, although at a reduced rate. For example, in the Artibonite region the local Justice and Peace Commission receives almost daily reports of murders, beatings, arrests and threats. Elsewhere, among many reported cases are those of the deputy mayor of Mirebalais, known for his defence of human rights, who was found decapitated on 5 November, and of a woman in Fort-Liberté shot dead by a paramilitary attaché on 10 December. In the capital armed gangs are attacking homes and stores, and there is shooting at night in the poor areas where residents are again discovering corpses in the streets at daybreak.

The US troops in Haiti, now reduced in number to some 6,000, have shown themselves reluctant to intervene to protect members of the public—in many places quite the reverse is reported. Members of the elite US Special Forces are working in tandem with remnants of the Haitian military and FRAPH to harass and illegally arrest democratic activists.

Human rights groups have also criticised the US for its role in the re-deployment of known human rights abusers. A vetting committee composed of Haitian army officers and organised by the US military and embassy had, by the end of November, considered the cases of 1,350 soldiers and officers, and rejected only 150 of them. Some well-known killers and torturers have simply been reassigned to different units.

Plans to reduce the 7,000-strong Haitian military to 1,500 and to create a separate police force to eventually number some 5,000 have barely begun. The US-led multinational force has moved to deploy an interim police force composed of “recycled” members of the existing Haitian force and new recruits from among the refugees at Guantánamo. This too has been criticised for being the same thugs in a different uniform.

Nor is there any good news about the economy that was devastated by the UN embargo and has shown few signs of recovery. Millions of dollars of international aid money have been promised but very little has actually made its way to Haitian state coffers. By mid-December the only financial aid to have materialised was $82m. to be used to pay off the interest accruing from previous loans.

Under pressure from the US, Aristide has appointed a prime minister, Smanck Michel, who is considered sympathetic to the business class. He in turn has formed a cabinet that includes people who supported the coup, including one, the Public Works minister, who was a minister in the first illegal post-coup regime.

Many Haitians who felt the mere presence of a constitutional government would be sufficient to induce improvements in their way of life are growing disillusioned, but others have responded by organising to make their demands known. (see overleaf).
Grass roots organisation — Haiti’s hope for the future

On February 7 1986 the dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier fled from Haiti. Five years later to the day the country’s first freely elected President, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, took office. Both events were made possible by the mobilisation of Haiti’s popular, grassroots organisations, and it is these groups again that hold the key to opening up the new situation for the benefit of the poor majority. As Haitians prepare to celebrate this double anniversary for the first time, following the demise of the military regime, CHARLES ARTHUR considers the prospects for Haiti’s popular movement.

Demonstrations, strikes and road-blocks contributed to the fall of Baby Doc and ushered in a period when hundreds of grassroots organisations were formed or emerged from clandestinity. Progressive Catholic groups, peasant organisations, student and labour unions, neighbourhood committees and women’s groups were at the forefront of the struggles against Duvalierism. Through them the Haitian majority gained for the first time a voice and a platform for their demands. But the progress of this amorphous popular movement and the success of its presidential candidate, Aristide, posed a threat - a direct one to the tiny Haitian elite and, indirectly, by the example it gave to the peoples of other Latin American countries, to the US. The military coup d’état in 1991 was not only against the government of Aristide—it was also meant to destroy Haiti’s popular organisations. The brutal terror unleashed by the Haitian military, Macoutes and FRAPH during the coup years claimed the lives of over 5,000 people. The murder of many leaders, activists and organizers from the popular organisations is the most obvious loss they have suffered. Organisations, structures and networks collapsed as thousands of other activists fled the repression by boat or left their homes to hide in different areas of the country. Those who remained to carry on ‘underground’ were hampered by a pervasive military and attack presence which restricted meetings and communications.

A sense of despair was only heightened by Aristide’s essentially passive strategy of waiting for the international community to act. Yet now, with the fall of the coup regime, the popular organisation have the choice to rebuild and resume their place at the forefront of the struggle for democracy. In the past six weeks, from Mare Rouge in the far north-west to Les Cayes in the South, organisations have marched, held sit-ins and demonstrations. However two major obstacles to a successful regeneration can be identified.

Firstly, there is the expectation that Aristide will make everything all right—that now he is back in the Presidential Palace, with US support and with millions of dollars of international aid money, he will be able to give everything they want Aristide as a ‘Messiah figure’ only encourages naivety but also makes it difficult for the progressive organisations to mobilise around important issues such as the US military presence or the structural adjustment plan which Aristide apparently endorses.

Secondly, the US Agency for International Development has announced that new aid for Haiti will be granted to those aid agencies who have come up with plans for counter progressive elements to become the new official face of reform. The new approach is that only by working with the pro-Aristide Lavalas coalition will the US money be awarded. The new changes to the US aid distribution system which will be used to attract voters to US-favoured candidates in the upcoming elections, and to divide and confuse the popular movement.

As if these new problems were not enough to contend with, members of the popular organisations continue to be targeted by Haitian soldiers, and attacks. However two months since the restoration of formal democracy, numerous grassroots organisations have shown that they are alive and waiting to kick.

The Ti Legit (Little Church) movement of progressive Catholic base communities played an important role during the coup years helping victims of the repression on the beach at Gressier into hiding, and documenting human rights abuses. The experience of these years can be expected to have reinforced members’ belief in the theology of liberation and to have deepened the split with the hierarchy which failed to condemn the violence.

Some leading members of the Ti Legit appear to have complete faith in Aristide’s ability to provide solutions. Others, though, are preaching that there can be no reconciliation without justice, and one, Father Yvon Massak, said he would take any steps necessary to help the US forces supporting FRAPH in order to destabilise the Aristide government. And, on 16 December, a mass sponsored by the Ti Legit groups of St Jean Bosco, Aristide’s former church, turned into a demonstration to government ministers and the National Palace to demand that criminals of the coup d’état be judged, that food prices be lowered, and that ministers with ‘criminal’ histories be ousted.

Women’s organisations have taken up the issue of justice for those who suffered from the military and attacks’ use of rape as a common method of terror and repression. On November 26 members of the women’s group, Solidarite Fann Ayisyen (SOFA), marched to the Ministry of Justice to demand justice and reparation for all women victims of the coup d’état and for the dismantling of the paramilitaries. SOFA also demanded that the new Minister for Women’s Affairs come up with programmes to help rape victims.

In November union members from Electricité d’Haiti occupied the new director’s office and overcame the intervention of US troops to win their demand that he be replaced. The workers opposed the appointment of the new director, claiming he was corrupt and that he refused to fire attachés and other military supporters added to the payroll during the coup years. In spite of the efforts of US troops to end the workers’ action, the government was obliged to make a new appointment.

The attempt to break the paralysis which came to the fore when Haitian environmental groups joined with Greenpeace on December 2 to demand that the US troops in Haiti take back to the US the toxic ash from Philadelphia that was dumped on the beach at Gressier in 1987. Thousands of tons were dumped after General Namphy’s regime accepted the import of what was termed ‘fertiliser’. The beach is a virtual no-go area because of the toxicity of the ash. The Collective for the Protection of the Environment and Alternative Development, and the Federation for the Restoration of the Natural Environment also demanded that the US troops remove all toxic waste generated during the occupation and that Haiti sign anti-waste agreements.

The beat of mobilisation was turned up higher in late December when thousands responded to a call by the various working class groups to demonstrate in Port-a-Peirce to demand the complete and immediate abolition of the Haitian army.

These signs reveal a new vitality bode well for the coming year. Only time will tell how successfully the grassroots organisations can recover and meet the challenges ahead.

(Sources include: Haiti Info, IPS and other news agencies.)
Quatters light up Haiti's darkest place

Leah Gordon

A patch of scrub land in Port-au-Prince lies near the slums of La Cité Soleil. This vacant lot near the main road is neither picturesque nor exceptionally ugly—This is Fort Dimanche, Papa Doc’s political prison and torture chamber. His reign of terror thousands of Haitians. Even military officers threw up in the sight of torture victims inside. Under the leadership of Madame Max, an unassuming woman who was the second-in-command of the Tontons Macoutes, torture and executions took place. The bodies laid outside in the morning as a warning to the Haitians. Papal Doc apparently enjoyed it. Execution squads ordered the order to be maintained. The site was once described as the darkest place in all of Haiti. The notorious prison sits like a black cloud, “sucking up what pieces of Haiti are left,” said one inhabitant. Blood on the blood of the Haitian people. Its excesses of cruelty leave the nation in mourning.

The prison was built in 1926 during the reign of Haitian dictator Papa Doc’s era. Its geopolitical position, close to the slums and the main road, makes it a symbol of the army’s power and control over the capital city. The police force, even without the support of repression itself.

In 2018, a peaceful demonstration by the inhabitants of Cité Soleil resulted in a massacre on what was supposed to be a peaceful demonstration against the construction of a steel plant. As a result of the massacre, 23 people were killed and thousands were wounded. The bodies had been dumped outside the prison walls, were being collected in a sack to be sold to voodoo priests. “We are from Cité Soleil and there is no more space to live here,” said a young man, his face covered with a scarf as protection from the dust. “We are tired of waiting for miracles. We will build our own homes here.”

Some families had already set up their living quarters inside the prison, their beds and possessions laid out in the old cells. Children swam and bathed in a massive water tank behind the Fort. Every day, some of the residents went to work in the steel plant, narrowly escaped with their lives.

The project is now being discussed as the development of an industrial park. The centerpiece of this development will be a coal-fired power station built by a French company and supplied by US coal. The project is now possible due to the structural adjustment plan that encourages the privatization of state-run industries, including the electricity company.

There is also talk of turning the prison building into a memorial museum for all the Duvaliers’ victims, but for now the people are deciding what is the most important use for it. Aristide once said that “the light of life does not shine on Fort Dimanche”—but now the light of life is shining from it.